THE HOLY IN THE ORDINARY

December 3, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
Matthew 24:36-44
Romans 13:11-14

"For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed..."
-Romans 13:11b (RSV)

A Saturday in early December on Michigan Avenue is not for the meek or timid. And our corner is either the best or the worst of it depending on your point of view. At 8:00 a.m. it looks like a normal Saturday morning, a few morning joggers and walkers... by 9:00, the pace is quickening; at 9:30 the first buses arrive with shoppers from Rockford and South Bend, Wisconsin and Iowa. By 10:00 the sidewalk is full of people. By 12:00 the sidewalk is crowded. By 2:00 you cannot penetrate the flow of humanity on the sidewalk. By 3:00 people are spilling off the sidewalk and into the street and there is a traffic jam of people - "pedestrian grid-lock" - every time the light changes.

There are three policemen in the intersection, two on horseback. And then the real fun starts.

On one corner a Salvation Army Brass Quartet accompanies a choir of high school vocalists singing the Hallelujah Chorus. A few feet away a picket line protesting the use of animal fur is chanting and jeering and insulting passing fur-clad shoppers.

On another corner the Sunday paper is already on sale and a lone alto saxophonist is playing Winter Wonderland.

Across the street three people representing Jews for Jesus are working the grid-locked crowd; and on the fourth corner there are several different people handing out flyers advertising bus rides, the newest and best Chicago pizza, the imminent end of the world, and a seafood restaurant, these distributed by a man dressed as a lobster.

People brave or foolish enough to drive automobiles into this scene become frustrated, or perhaps terrified, and blow their horns a lot and in the middle of that cacophony, if you listen very carefully, you can hear, coming from somewhere around the forty foot tree, an electronically enhanced duet singing, nasally, of all things, "Silent night! holy night! All is calm, all is bright."

That was happening a week before Advent, and it accentuated our eccentricity. We are the last building to put out our seasonal decorations. It's always that way, but it is particularly conspicuous in years like this one, when the calendar provides an extra week between Thanksgiving and the first Sunday in Advent. The other buildings on the block were as ready for Christmas as they are going to get the Friday before last. We, the institution with the most investment in the holiday, hold back, refuse to play, and when we do, finally, when we come to the first Sunday in Advent, it is almost reluctantly, certainly quietly.

The reason is that we have a point we wish to make: several points actually, and they are really rather important to us.

The first is that the birth of Jesus was an ordinary human birth: that insofar as it represents God's coming to earth, it is the holy in the ordinary: not the holy in the spectacular, the holy in the dramatic, the holy in the colorful, but the holy in the ordinary. We think that is an important point.

The second point is subtle. Not everybody gets it. It is that there is a paradox about the event we are about to celebrate. While the event itself, the birth of Jesus, happened in history 2,000 years ago, there is a sense in which its fulfillment, its completion is still in the future. The paradox which the Christian church alone knows about is that the coming of Jesus Christ is a sign that God is still at work bringing a new creation into being, a new future, and that the deepest significance of our Christmas celebration is not looking backward in nostalgia and sentimentality, as lovely and appealing as that is, but looking forward in hope and courage and anticipation.

That dynamic - that "now but not yet"... "here but in the future"... "he has come but he is coming"... which is what we are expressing with our Advent music and purple color - reflects something profound about the human condition... the universal human experience of living with a sense of expectation. We seem to have a built-in longing for something that our lives do not seem capable of producing. We long for personal peace, wholeness, a sense of at-homeness, salvation if you will. Our longing is personal, and sometimes is also specifically political. The prophets of Israel looked forward to a future day when God's Messiah would establish an era of justice and peace on earth.

Throughout Christendom today people are hearing the traditional readings for the First Sunday in Advent including lovely verses from the second chapter of Isaiah. They were read in morning worship on the Belknap this morning in the Malta Harbor and in the congregation was the President of the United States, George Bush. "...and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war any more." [Isaiah 2:4]

The idea that human life is lived in a sense of anticipation, a waiting for something to happen is the theme of one of the most famous and most studied and certainly most enigmatic plays, Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett. In that drama two characters are waiting. They talk nonsense: a flow of thought begins to develop and is suddenly terminated

and never picked up again. Godot never comes, of course. Play-goers become uneasy, anxious, sometimes angry. And drama scholars believe that was Beckett's point. Human life is lived in anticipation - in hope - in expectation that Godot, or someone, will come.

The idea is in the Bible... in the Old Testament prophets who look forward to the coming of the Messiah. The New Testament also looks forward to the day of the Lord's coming... Those passages, too, are traditionally read in Advent. Someone called them "happy hunting grounds for persons fascinated by the end of the world." But Jesus consistently refused to be pinned down on that topic. "No one knows the hour," he said. The job of believers is to live in a state of anticipation, to lean into the future, expecting God to continue the process of redeeming the world.

Paul was a political prisoner, on his way to Rome for a trial he knew was going to result in his execution. He wrote a letter to the tiny Christian community in Rome to introduce himself; and near the end he turns to the subject of the future... Salvation, Paul said, is closer at hand than we anticipated. He expected the end, the return of Jesus Christ in his own lifetime. And even though his timing was off, his theology was right on the mark. "Christians," in Paul's view, "are creatures of the future, not the past. To it they are to look, and by it they are to act." "Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," he wrote. [Lamar Williamson, Interpretation]

There has always been within Christianity a fascination with the end of the world. There is a warning here for those who expect too much: those who read the New Testament predictions of the end literally and try to match Scripture to events happening in the world today. But there is a word of warning to those who expect too little, and that may be the more relevant word for us. If the celebration of Christmas has any deeper meaning for us, it is that this world is in the process of being loved and recreated and saved by God and that people who believe that can live into the future with enormous hope. That is fundamentally different from a Christmas celebration which is limited to a nostalgic re-visting of the past.

In ancient Israel the King was re-enthroned annually with a full coronation ceremony. Many of the Psalms, including the one we read responsively today, were written for the re-enthronement ritual. The idea was that the King's reign was made real in the annual re-enthronement ceremony. And that, says Walter Brueggemann, one of our brightest Biblical theologians, is what the church is doing in celebrating the birth of Jesus annually. It is not simply a birthday party... it is a re-enthronement of our King.

The problem, he says, is that we look only backward... to the past. "In our contemporary society we have arrived at a manufactured religion, worshiping a God from whom we expect no serious transformation. Indeed we prefer a God who has become a guarantor of the way things are. We absolutize the present and imagine it has always been the way it is." [W. Brueggemann, Israel's Praise, p. 127]

You see, what the church has to say at this time of year is that God is transforming the world. What we have to add to the year-end consumer bash is that there is hope - hope for a different and better future for the world and for each individual. What the church tries to say is that we actually believe in the possibility of transformation. And for the authentic Advent word to get heard it has to penetrate to people and to places in us where there is a need and a longing for transformation.

That word has always been a source of hope and courage for those whose future did not look so bright.

Jewish exiles, miles away from home, were strengthened by the prophet's proclamation: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

African slaves, caged like animals, separated from home, from family, from any sense of continuity with the past, or hope for the future, adopted the religion of their owners and heard in that religion a word their owners had forgotten, and sang, "My Lord, what a morning when the stars begin to fall."

To people in prison, in exile, in slavery, about to be executed, down through history the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus, has been stunning news that the future can be different, that there is hope and therefore reason for living in courage and in joy.

Why, other than this basic hopefulness for a different future, is the government of El Salvador waging war daily against the church?

Does anybody actually believe that the six Jesuit priests and their cook and her daughter who were murdered were guilty of anything but hope for a different future? Does anyone really expect us to believe that the headquarters of the Lutheran Church and the Episcopal Cathedral, both of which were invaded and shut down by government troops, are doing anything other than people who know about the birth of Jesus have always done, namely live as if God is actually on the side of a new future characterized by peace and justice and gentleness.

"Over against the blandness of contemporary religious life and the apathy with which many face the future... comes electrifying good news..." is the way Lamar Williamson, a New Testament scholar, puts it. Jesus is born... salvation is nearer than we thought... the future will be different.

And so it will... and so it is. The most mind-boggling picture I ever saw, certainly the equivalent of men walking on the moon, was Mikhail Gorbachev and Pope John Paul II beneath a picture of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Soviet leader and the American President talked last week. The Berlin Wall came down. Institutions which appeared as firmly entrenched, as permanent as human institutions ever get, changed over night. The publisher of the largest German language newspaper in the country, at our Michigan Avenue Forum last Wednesday, said that if anyone had predicted the events of November 9, just one week before, he would have judged them to be crazy. And since then - the streets of Prague filled and under the benevolent gaze of Good King Wenceslas - it happened again.

How can we not hear those ancient words about beating swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks and Matthew's later word about watching and being ready, and St. Paul's bold affirmation of God's love and mercy and justice breaking into the life of the world... how not hear those words on this first Sunday of Advent 1989 without tears of joy and gratitude and renewed hope for the future?

When Charles Beard, distinguished historian at Columbia University retired, he was reflecting during his last classroom lecture on what he had learned from teaching history for half a century: "Number one," he said, "when it is dark enough you can see the stars." [Walter Burghardt, Sir, We Would See Jesus, p. 37]

There are times when you and I need that good word of hope as we think about our world and what the future holds. And there are also times when we need that word of hope, that Advent promise, in a much smaller world - the world of our lives, our relationships, our jobs, our health, our future.

The gray final days of November and the first days of December are among the darkest of the year; and they reflect an undeniable counterpoint to the brightly lighted, loud and frantic festival on a Michigan Avenue Saturday afternoon. There is a melancholy about Advent. It is a reminder that another year is past, that we are another year older, that the babies aren't babies anymore, that children are grown and the elderly are a little more frail. The intimate family customs, cherished and repeated detail by detail always remind us so distinctly of the dear ones who shared the joy in the past but are not here this December.

And for some, perhaps for all of us - a bit at least, personal darkness is accentuated by the bright lights of the carnival... the darkness of a marriage or a precious relationship which has turned to ashes, or the darkness of a life dream which has shattered into pieces at your feet, or the darkness of aging with its catalog of demeaning and humiliating diminishments, or the darkness of unemployment because you are no longer needed, or the darkness of an illness that secretly and silently rules within you and whose existence you have shared with no one.

To us - even us - each and every one of us, the promise of Advent is given again. There is hope and reason for courage and anticipation. He is coming... his word is sure and his love and mercy are forever.

He came in the universal simplicity of a human birth... the Holy, in the ordinary. So he comes again, quietly, even in the midst of the color and noise of the season... He is coming to a world which aches and longs for his peace... He comes to you - to your heart... where you long for hope and peace... He comes in the ordinary experiences of life... even something as modest as bread broken and a cup shared.

"Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."

Amen.